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Citation for final published version:

Visser, Jelle 2014. Sidonius Apollinaris, Ep. II.2: the man and his villa. Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture 8 , pp. 26-45. 10.18573/j.2014.10324 file

Publishers page: <http://doi.org/10.18573/j.2014.10324>
<<http://doi.org/10.18573/j.2014.10324>>

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SIDONIUS APOLLINARIS, *EP. II.2*: THE MAN AND HIS *VILLA*

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Abstract: The article discusses Sidonius Apollinaris' *Epistula* II.2, a fifth-century letter on Sidonius' Gallic *villa*, Avitacum. In the course of the argument, a detailed discussion, combined with a translation of the letter, aims to explain how Sidonius used the *villa*, combined with literary motifs, especially Pliny the Younger's letters on his *villae*, and a topos of modesty, to present himself as a man of culture and refinement. The *villa* and the letter are then discussed within the framework of late antique elite behaviour, signaling the differences in Sidonius' letter when compared with Pliny and using these differences to identify late-antique markers of self-perception.

Introduction

Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 430 – c. 486) was a typical exponent of the Gallic Roman aristocracy of the fifth century. By birth a member of the Apollinaris family, which had provided provincial prefects for the government of Roman Gaul for generations, he received a decent literary education, which confirmed his association with the cultural traditions of his family. Sidonius was a courtier and panegyrist to, amongst others, his father in law, the short-lived emperor Avitus (r. 455 – 457), Avitus' successor Majorian (r. 457 – 461) and the emperor Anthemius (r. 467 – 472), who rewarded him with the office of urban prefect of Rome (in 468), and the titles of patrician and senator. In the 470s and 480s, Sidonius served as bishop of Clermont – a switch from secular to religious office that was not unusual in this period: Avitus was bishop of Piacenza before becoming an emperor.

As bishop of Clermont, Sidonius tried to maintain his city as (nominally) Roman and catholic, against the aspirations of the Arian Visigothic king Euric (r. 466 – 484), who eventually managed to “capture” the city by treaty in 474. After 474, Sidonius seems to have continued to serve the people of Clermont as bishop until his death, after which he has been locally venerated as a saint.¹ Thus, in his life, Sidonius witnessed the gradual breakdown of Roman Gaul, from imperial rule until the 470s, when Franks in North Gaul and Visigoths in the south fought against

¹ There are a number of biographical sketches of various length, e. g. Harries (1994) and ead. (1996), Tamburri (1996), 67, and Conte (1999), 707-709, while Chadwick (1955), 296-327, and Stevens (1933) are now outdated.

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<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/clarc/jlarc>

the rump state of the Roman governors Aegidius (d. 464) and Syagrius (r. 464 – 486) in the middle. Throughout this period of breakdown, Sidonius remained culturally loyal to his background.

Sidonius' modern renown stems from his literary work, his *Epistulae* and *Carmina*. Until the 1980s the *Epistulae* in particular were negatively evaluated by classicists, as unoriginal, decadent imitations of Pliny, either revealing the author's thinly veiled paganism, or an almost heretical disinterest in his own Christian religion.² Recent historiography and – to a lesser extent – classicism reassessed Sidonius' value as a witness of the Romano-Gallic culture of his times.³ There is, however, a problem here. If Sidonius' *Epistulae* imitated Pliny, what is the effect of this imitation on Sidonius' value as a source for the history of his own time?

The aim here is to resolve this general question by applying it to one of the more well-known letters, *Ep.* II.2, which discusses the author's *villa* Avitacum, generally held to be located in or near modern Aydat in the Auvergne. The *villa*, an important element in the self-perception of the Roman aristocracy throughout Antiquity, is a theme which we also find in two of Pliny's letters: *Ep.* II.17 describes Laurentum, now Torre Paterno, near Ostia. *Ep.* V.6 describes Tifernum, now Città di Castello, in Umbria. It is perhaps because they were so important to their social class that both Pliny and Sidonius also mention others' *villae* elsewhere in their work, but Sidonius, *Ep.* II.2 and Pliny, *Epp.* II.17 and V.6 stand apart because in these three cases the whole letter is almost exclusively a description of one particular *villa*, the author's.⁴

Sidonius, *Ep.* II.2 is chosen not only because it is a well-known letter with clear Plinian antecedents, but also because it has a clear connection with Sidonius' contemporaneous surroundings, *in casu* his own house. It may therefore lend itself to study not only Sidonius' connection with Pliny, but also his connection with the realities of his own time, which together are at the heart of the paradox sketched above.

I principally approach the letter as a pragmatic act of communication, written with a particular audience in mind and aimed to bring across a certain message to that audience. Therefore, I will first study the rhetorical and narrative devices used to that end. Then I will turn specifically to literary imitation in the letter as part of the letter's rhetoric, with explicit reference to Pliny the Younger and the purpose, or purposes, of imitation. This interpretation follows from the first, because without due interpretation of the way the letter 'works', we cannot discuss its indebtedness

² Janssen (1956), 262-263, Sizoo (1951), 199; cf. Zelzer (1994-1995), 541, quoting Hermann Peter.

³ Santelia (2002), 7 and references given there.

⁴ Cf. Loyen (II, p. 246), Harries (1994), 10, Dark (2005), 332, Kaufmann (1995): 49, n. 49, and Stevens (1933), 185-195 on Avitacum. I was unable to benefit from the study of a recent article by Laura Hutchings (2009), which seems to propose the same general question, concluding Sidonius was a veracious reporter of his own times. Cf. also Percival (1997a), and Amherdt (2004).

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to Pliny while this indebtedness itself is not without implications for the ‘working’ of the letter.⁵ Finally, the letter will be compared with archaeological records for late-antique *villae* in Gaul.

1. Salutatio, captatio, and conclusio (sections 1, 2, and 20)

Ep. II.2 professes to be a letter, addressed to one person, Domitius, inviting him to spend a summer holiday in Avitacum. The letter is generally held to have been written in the mid-460s, between Sidonius’ time as a panegyrist at Avitus’ and Maorian’s court and his association with Anthemius. The description of the *villa* makes up for most of the letter (sections 3-15 of the *narratio*, sections 3-19), while the invitation proper forms the subject of the *salutatio* and *captatio* (1-2), and a greeting forms the *conclusio* (20). I will treat the *salutatio*, *captatio*, and *conclusio* first, because they provide our evidence for the pragmatic aspects of the letter as an act of communication, but little else.

Sidonius to his friend Domitius: greetings!

1. You accuse me of being a peasant, while I could just as well complain that you are still in town! Spring has changed into summer, and the sun, heightened up to its highest course, extends its ray up to the far pole of Scythia. What shall I say about the climate of our own land? Our divine maker placed it thus, that we undergo the heat of the western world to an even greater extent. What more? The earth is heating up – Alpine ice is expunged and the earth is entirely inscribed with gaping cracks of drought. Dirty gravel lies in the shoals, mud on the banks, dust on the fields. Even water, flowing along a lingering path, wilts: the sun no longer warms the waves, but boils them.

2. And now, while one sweats in light linen, the other in silk, you go fully dressed outwardly, inwardly braced, and moreover, sitting in the hollow chair of a citizen of Ameria (*concava municipis amerini sede*), you begin to explain: “My mother was a Samian” (Terence, *Eun.* 107), to your yawning pupils, paling by heat, not less than by fear. If this seems sane to you at heart, wise man, why would you not hurriedly be led from the panting anguish of town and, being brought into our company, eagerly hide yourself in the most merciful retreat from the harshness of the dog-star?

From the first two sections we learn that Sidonius addresses a certain Domitius, of whom we know little, and only what Sidonius tells us in the letter, and in *Carm.* 24.10-15, where one Domitius – probably the same man – is the first of ten *sodales* whom the author addresses. Judging by Sidonius’ remark regarding the strictness of Domitius’ literary criticism in *Carm.* 24, and by the reference in *Ep.* II.2.2 to Terence, *Eun.* 107, in relation to Domitius’ daily life, Domitius was a grammarian. As such, he was an important person in the life of the Roman elite, as schoolmasters

⁵ Cf. Cameron (1965), 289, Zelzer (1994-1995), 545, Mratschek (2008), 364.

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were guardians of intellectual life, providing the educational service which meant inclusion in the intellectual *Romanitas*, which, with the gradual disappearance of the empire's army and administration as a means of personal advancement, became an even more important factor in the local elite's self-definition, together with the *militia* of the church.⁶ Domitius is generally taken to have lived in Clermont. This is based solely on Domitius' precedence in the list of *sodales* of *Carm.* 24. Being mentioned first there, such is the reasoning, means living the closest geographically to the author, that is: to Avitacum. The argument does not strike me as particularly convincing.⁷

As a pragmatic act of communication, *Ep.* II.2 may have lived a double life. What we have is a version meant to form a part of the second book of *Letters*, and of the collection of *Letters* as a whole. This version, though addressed to Domitius, was not meant for his eyes specifically, nor for his eyes only: it was meant to show Sidonius' literary skills to a wider audience, which means the letter had a different pragmatic function from its stated one, namely to be an invitation. There may have been an older version, also addressed Domitius but meant for him personally. Its professed function as an invitation would then have coincided with its pragmatic function. In the form transmitted to us the latter is to demonstrate Sidonius' skill as a literary pen pal. That earlier letter may have been heavily edited when *Ep.* II was prepared for publication, and possibly edited some more when new books were added to the collection.

Due to its new pragmatic function as part of the *Epistulae*, the basic factual characteristics of the letter no longer had precedence over the literary aspects of letter-writing. The change of function and the consequent occasion for further embellishment provided opportunity and reason for playing literary games with the person of the addressee. There are reasons to suspect Sidonius of such literary play. The first lies in the phrase *concava municipis amerini sede* (2). Housman suggested a qualitative rather than locative reading of the genitive *municipis amerini*. In his view it referred to a chair of withies, for which Ameria was supposedly famous. He was followed in this interpretation by Anderson. One reference to this fame, however, is too little to make the argument convincing.⁸

⁶ Loyen II, p. 217, n. 8 lists what we know and what is assumed about Domitius; cf. Kaufmann (1995): 295, Santelia (2002), esp. 69. Martindale (1980), 371, considers both sources to concern the same man (Domitius 2). Neither this nor any other volume of the PLRE records other Domitii in Gaul. Mathisen (2005), 8 locates Domitius in Lyons, as this letter pre-dates Sidonius' ordination, suggesting that at that time, Sidonius had no connection with Clermont. This is somewhat difficult to believe, as Avitacum belonged to Sidonius' in laws, the Aviti, who were based in Clermont. If that does not mean Domitius certainly lived in Clermont, at least it does not mean he certainly lived in Lyons! cf. n. 6. On grammarians and their function, cf. Banniard (1992), 414-415, Harries (1996), Henke (2008), 155, 159, Semple (1967), 137 for the church. On Sidonius' appreciation of education, cf. Näf (1995), 137-139.

⁷ Contra Loyen II, p. 217, n.8, n.9. Prevot (1999), 66-67.

⁸ Housmann (1900, p. 54), Anderson (p. 418, n. 1). Housman provides a *locus similis* in Pliny the Elder; cf. Loyen (II., p. 217, n. 7). All editors have read *municipis amerini*. The manuscript alternatives *municipi samerini* (L) and *municipii camerini* (M, P, F), all of which would only allow

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Two alternative interpretations might carry more weight. The first is a reference to Pliny, *Ep.* VIII.20, where Ameria is mentioned in relation to a lake. The second one is from Cicero, whose fame was prompted by his defence of the *municeps* Armerinus Sextus Roscius. The reference may therefore be to teaching Cicero, which would mean two allusions to teaching are given: one to poetry (Terence), the other to prose (Cicero).⁹ A second reason for suspecting literary games is Domitius' name, which may be a reference to Domitius Apollinaris, the addressee of Pliny, *Ep.* II.9 and V.6. Sidonius certainly knew at least the second letter, which reappears in his own letter throughout.¹⁰

A fully 'literary' interpretation of the addressee, however, leaves us with a loose end: Domitius' occurrence in *Carm.* 24, which does not play the same game as *Ep.* II.2. If there is a name-game in *Carm.* 24, it can only be correctly understood as such by someone who knows *Ep.* II.2, but this seems an unlikely scenario, especially since this would presuppose that the following nine *sodales* in *Carm.* 24 are also the subjects of literary puns, referring to Sidonius' *Epistulae*, which they are not. It seems less challenging to assume there really was a man named Domitius among Sidonius' friends, and leave open the option that Domitius' name was used to refer to Pliny's friend Domitius Apollinaris by specifically addressing him in this letter. Whether the literary pun was already prominent when the – hypothetical – letter to Domitius was sent in the 460s, or was the result of later editorial work, we cannot tell.

The reference to Pliny's Domitius Apollinaris invites to a comparison between the introduction of Pliny's letters on *villae* and Sidonius'. Pliny's *Ep.* V.6 opens with a *casus scribendi*, as its addressee, Domitius Apollinaris, had dissuaded Pliny from staying in the country, and Pliny takes the opportunity to explain his actions by giving an account of his estate. In a similar vein, *Ep.* II.17 seemingly offers a reply to a letter by Gallus – the addressee – who wondered what the attractions of Pliny's Laurentine *villa* were. In both cases, the description offers the answer to the question put by the addressee. Sidonius, on the other hand, goes one better and opens his letter with a very different rhetorical figure.¹¹ He takes on Domitius' "accusation" – the verb *causari* seems to be ironically used – by mocking the addressee's staying in the city and offering him an invitation to the estate. Sidonius' pretext for describing the *villa* thus differs markedly from Pliny's. Where the

a locative reading, can be excluded. The first is a writing error, the second possibly a correction by a copyist trying to make sense of the passage. Camerini, however, could only refer to the Camargue, Chambéry, or Cambrai, and none of these lies close enough to the Auvergne to be convincing abodes for Domitius, nor does, for that matter, the only Ameria in Gaul, modern Aymeries, near Cambrai. Cf. Zelzer (1995), 547 on Sidonius' letters and their editions.

⁹ *Municeps Armerinus* occurs in both *Pro Sex. Roscio* 15 and Sulpicius Victor, *Institutiones Oratoria* 19, the second instance referring to the first.

¹⁰ A similar reference is found in Sidonius, *Ep.* I.1, which quotes Pliny, *Ep.* I.1; cf. Zelzer & Zelzer (2002), 403, and in IX.1, where Pliny is explicitly mentioned.

¹¹ *Iubes* – *iubeo* instead of the usual *iubes* – *pareo*; cf. López (1994), 205.

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following description has an argumentative value in Pliny's letters, Sidonius uses it to flesh out the invitation rather than supply it with arguments.

20. But I will not go on longer, lest autumn would find you still reading, if the letter's end would be further away. Therefore give me your speedy arrival (for you will excel yourself in delaying the return trip). Forgive me on this account that this scrupulously-written letter exceeds by a little the required brevity: while the whole lay of the place was described at length, and still not all was discussed in eagerness to ward off being tedious. On that account, a good judge and a skilful reader will not call the page, which describes the place, the greater, but the *villa*, which is extensively described. Goodbye

The letter's conclusion (20) gives little interpretative information, being a show of literary accomplishment, based on a topos of brevity and two antitheses. First, the author states he must be brief or the letter would arrive late, and autumn would already be upon Domitius before he finished reading it. Then Domitius is told to come quickly, while he is allowed to be slow to leave. Finally Sidonius excuses himself for perhaps being excessive in his description of details, though he asserts there are many details which he did not mention for fear of being tedious; the fault is not in the size of the letter, but in the excessive size of the estate described. Such rhetorical figures do not convey any direct meaning; the first harks back to the professed purpose of the letter – that is: to Sidonius' invitation, the second elaborates on the future warm welcome which flows forth from the invitation, the third is an implicit argument *a fortiori*, combining the greatness of the *villa* to the impossibility to tell all about it within the limits of this letter. For the purpose of finding reality behind the rhetoric, this section is without importance; even the reference to autumn falling on the reading Domitius does not give clues to the time of the season. What the section does provide, however, is an echo of the first part of the conclusion of Pliny's *Ep.* V.6, which dwells on similar themes, though to a much greater extent, and with greater elaboration.

2. *The location and orientation of the villa (section 3)*

The main body of *Ep.* II.2 is the *narratio* (3-19), styled as a description of the reception Domitius will receive if he visits Sidonius in his pastoral surroundings, including (3-15) a walk from the entrance, through the baths, to the drawing room. This structure has a spatial and a temporal aspect, as the reader – Domitius, and, by proxy, any other reader – is shown part of the property as if he was a guest who is guided through the *villa* by Sidonius, having arrived just in time to refresh himself in the baths (sections 4-7), before lunching with his host (sections 10-12), spending a siesta in the drawing-room (13-14) and the later part of the afternoon at the lakeside (15-19). The temporal aspect of this structure is another marked

difference with Pliny's examples, which are descriptive without containing a temporal aspect.

Let us look at the *narratio* in some more detail. Sidonius starts (3) by giving the lay of the land.

3. Indeed, if you want to, read about the place you are called to, what kind a place it is. We are in Avitacum: the place has this name, because it belongs to my wife, whose father was very dear to me. Such is the unity I have with my family – through God's ordinance, lest you would fear that it is magic. In the west a hill, steep though it consists of earth, still spills out two lower ridges, which extend for a length of about four *iugera*, and until the field opens up enough for a *vestibulum* for the house, the valley is outlined by flanks of cliffs up to the edge of the *villa*, which is faced by slopes facing each other in north and south.

The orientation of the *villa* is north to south, with two sides, one west, one east, resembling a well-known type of *villa*, a longitudinal structure with porticoes on either side, the eastern one of which is later mentioned explicitly.¹² It is approached from the west, where there is a *mons terrenus*, from which two ridges run east, forming a valley, at the east end of which the *villa* is situated at the lakeside.

The valley itself Sidonius calls a *vestibulum*.¹³ This opening section differs from Pliny's letters. *Ep.* II.17 has no geographic opening, only a mention of the way to reach the *villa* from Rome, while *Ep.* V.6 starts with a description of the geographic setting of his *villa*, but this primarily concerns the agricultural and economical aspects of the estate, and the relation of its geographical setting to Domitius Apollinaris' arguments against staying in Tuscany. The economical aspect of *villa* ownership is entirely absent from Sidonius' geographical description, and indeed from the letter as a whole, except briefly in (19), as money is not a suitable subject for invitations, especially if the invitation concerns a carefree summer holiday.¹⁴

The description of the *villa* as situated on a slope, rather than on top of a hill or on level ground, and the references to porticoes and views seem similar to Pliny's, but there are differences as well. Pliny's description dwells at length at the gardens in front of the house, whilst Sidonius does not discuss gardens; the *vestibulum* is bare, as far as the letter is concerned – in keeping with the bucolic beauty on which later sections exemplify, even the 'economical' section 19. These differences can be interpreted as the result of geographical differences between the two villas, but the mention of the *mons terrenus* for the Puy de la Rodde – if, indeed, the *villa* was

¹² Both the lakeside location and the *villa* type are well-attested for *villae* of this period; cf. Dark (2005), 331, 333-335, and Stevens (1933), 185-195. Dark's article focusses on the similarities between Sidonius' account and archaeological evidence, but from time to time he errs in his interpretation of Sidonius' text.

¹³ Cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.* V.3: *C. Aelius Gallus ... vestibulum esse dicit ... locum ante ianuam domus vacuum, per quem a via aditus accessusque ad aedis est.*

¹⁴ Cf. Dark (2005), 338, who makes little of this absence, due to the specific question on which that article is based.

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situated where it is commonly thought to have been – may be a conscious echo of Pliny's reference to the Appenines, though *mons* would be the obvious word to use for a mountain or hill of any substance.

3. The baths (sections 4-9)

Sections 4-9 are perhaps the best-known of the letter. They are often invoked in archaeological discussions about the supposed decline of the *villa* in Late Antiquity. They concern the *villa*'s baths, which seem to have been located in a separate building to the south-west of the main building, at the southern edge of the valley.¹⁵ The baths consisted of four rooms; a hot room with an apse, a sweat-room of the same size as the hot room, but without an apse, and a cool room with a pyramidal roof, chairs, and a swimming pool. Everything is described at length, but Sidonius especially prides himself in the cold room, which emulates public baths.¹⁶

4. The bath-house clings to the roots of a wooded cliff in the south-west, and if the forest on top of the ridge would be stripped of its foliage, it would roll down to the mouth of the furnace, heaps forming, as if by the fall down the ridge itself. First the hot room rises, which is equal in size to the sweat room, except for an apse with a basin, where the force of the boiling water, constrained in its courses, bursts out through the pierced sides of pliant lead piping. Inside, the room is heated and full of daylight, and this abundance of light inside forces any modest people to consider themselves to be something more than naked.

5. Then the cool baths extend, which one may not impudently compare with the swimming pools built in public baths. The first has a roof which is pointed into a cone, while the ridges are covered from the four corners with imbricated rain-tiles. The builder added two windows in the area where roof and wall meet, so that the well-built ceiling appears to the eyes of those who look up. The room itself is squared exactly in measures tallying in size, in such a way that it can contain as many chairs as the number of people the semicircular bath can contain, while not impeding the servants in the discharge of their duty. The interior face of the wall is covered with only the splendour of smooth stone (*solo levigati caementi candore*).

6. Here no base story (*turpis historia*) presents itself through the naked beauty of painted bodies, which just as they decorate the art, disfigure the artist. Absent are ridiculous actors, deceiving in dress and appearances, imitating the dress of Philistio with multi-coloured paints. Absent are the scenes of the slippery and twisting pal-aestra, with boxing and wrestling, the groans of which, in real life, the gymnasiarch's chaste rod dissolves immediately if they devolve into something more obscene.

¹⁵ Cf. Balmelle (2001), 181-182 on the attestation of separate bathhouses as well as baths within the main building, the south-west being Vitruvius' preferred location; cf. Cam (2003), 150.

¹⁶ Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* II.17.16 for the comparison between public and private, which concerns a colonnade in Pliny's case. The remark on proportion perhaps a reference to Vitruvius, or to the description of the baths in Pliny, *Ep.* V.6? Cf. Cam (2003), 148, Stevens (1933), 72, n. 4.

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7. What more? Nothing will be found on these surfaces that would not be saintlier to see. Only a few verses, with the least immoderate temperament, delay the arriving reader, because there is neither a need to read them again nor a disdain from reading them through. If you wonder about the marbles, neither Paros, Carystos, Proconnesos, Phrygia, Numidia, or Sparta have placed there their shell of varied stone, nor do I lie about a scattered grain, coloured with genuine murex, through Ethiopian stones, or haughty purple rocks. But even if we are not enriched by rigour of foreign stone, my cottages or huts still have civic coldness. Why not rather listen to what we have than what we do not have?

8. On the eastern side an annex with a swimming pool, or, if you prefer Greek, a *baptisterium*, which takes in about twenty thousand *modii*, is connected to this hall. Having been washed clean one comes from the heat to this place through a triple passage in the middle of the wall, opened up by arched intervals. In between are not piers but columns, which skilled architects call the signs of grand buildings (*purpuras aedificorum*). Into this pool, then, six protruding pipes with the likenesses of lions' heads, which, to those who enter quickly, seem to have a real set of teeth, sheer rage in their eyes, and real manes in their neck, pour out a stream, drawn from the mountain ridge and swayed by channels, and curved around the edge of the pool.

9. If the master of the house or the multitude of inhabitants or a guest would stand here, one would have to speak in one another's ear, because, on account of the falling stream, each others' voices are less well understood: thus forced by this alien sound, a conversation meant for all assumes an amusing air of secrecy...

Scholarly disagreement arises over the baths' inner decoration. Sidonius' words suggest humbleness, and an apparent lack of decoration; Sidonius claims that you could call his house a hut or cottage because of the absence of foreign marbles (7), an absence which is explicitly mentioned (6-7), as is the absence of indecent nudes, actors, and – if I interpret Sidonius' *turpis historia* correctly – pagan myths.¹⁷ His walls are decorated *solo levigati caementi candore*, “with only the splendour of smoothed stone” (5), except for a set of verses, which display the owner's education and taste (7) – probably the verses now known as Sidonius *Carm.* 18 and 19.

Two things should make us beware of taking the designation of “cottages or huts” literally. The first is the obvious use of a topos of modesty – huts, after all, seldom have separate multi-roomed bathhouses. The other is that much of the interior is described in a kind of *praeteritio* – in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is. The absence of foreign marble, for example, says nothing of the presence of foreign stone other than marble, nor of the presence of Gallic marble, e.g. from the Pyrenees, which has been found in *villae* in the Auvergne and beyond. Marie-Thérèse Cam demonstrated that *caementum* indicates marble in certain passages of Vitruvius, which Sidonius may have imitated, which could mean that Sidonius used *De Architectura* as a literary text, rather than as an architectural handbook. Non-figurative marble decoration, moreover, is known from late antique *villae* in

¹⁷ The passage echoes Martial III.58.25-28.

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south-western Gaul, especially in bathhouses, as is poetic epigraphy – even if Avitacum is the most notable occurrence.¹⁸

Comparing descriptions of baths in Sidonius and Pliny again pairs similarity to difference. Pliny's *villae* both had baths in the main building, not separate baths, while position, relative size and importance of their description within the letter as a whole differ. Perhaps the structure of Sidonius' letters explains the position of the baths at the beginning of the *narratio*, the relative length of the section within the letter as a whole is testimony to the growing importance of baths in Roman elite self-definition. In Pliny's day Romans could use baths in any city of any size at the expense of the emperor or a local bigwig, who used this form of conspicuous spending to show off status. The rich of course also had baths of their own, which also expressed status, but were primarily there for convenience. With changing forms of status expression, decrease of elite urban munificence, and the rise of new Others (*bagaudae*, barbarians), baths became more explicitly associated with Roman elite lifestyle. Their extensive appearance in Sidonius' letter may therefore express their importance in Sidonius' self perception.¹⁹

4. The main building (sections 9-11)

At the end of the ninth section, Sidonius leads his readers from the baths to the main building.

9. ... After these rooms are left, one sees the front of the lady's dining room (*triclinium matronalis*), to which a storeroom is attached, divided only from the weaving-room by a wall of a wall of the military type.

10. On the east side a portico overlooks the lake, supported by rounded wooden pillars rather than envious monoliths. From the *vestibulum*, a long covered passage, unobstructed by walls, stretches out in the middle, which, because it does not look out unto anything, I may at least rightly call a *cryptoporticus*, albeit not a *hippodromus*. Something, however, taken from this space at the far end of the corridor, makes a nicely cool place, where a very talkative chorus of petty clients and nurses chants for a retreat in a feast that is open for all, while I and mine have turned towards the bedchamber.

11. From the *cryptoporticus* one comes into the winter dining room, which a blazing fire in an arched oven often stains with black soot – but why do I tell you this, you, whom I now in the very least invite to the hearth? Why would I not rather speak about things that suit you and the time of year? From this dining-room there is a passage into a *diaeta* or small dining-room, towards which about the whole lake can be seen, and which is itself open to all the lake. In this room there is an arrangement of dining couches and a fine table. One goes up to the area or mounted surface

¹⁸ Balmelle (2001), 199-200, 206; Bedon (1984); Cam (2003); Delhey (1991); cf. on the whole passage López (1994), 267; Dark (2005), 333-334; the latter with caution.

¹⁹ Cf. Dark (2005), 337.

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where these things are from the portico lying beneath it gradually through short and narrow steps. Reclining in this place, you will occupy yourself with the pleasures of looking out, if you are ever idle during the meal.

Sidonius' description of the building does not allow for a full reconstruction. Sidonius mentions several rooms in short succession – the eastern portico, which, in keeping with the pastoral setting, has timber columns, rather than marble ones, the lady's dining-room (*triclinium matronalis*), a storeroom, and a weaving-room.²⁰ These last two rooms are the only hints to some sort of economic life in the *villa* of Avitacum. Then the reader reaches what Sidonius would have us call a *cryptoporticus*, rather than a *hypodromus*. Both words are part of a series of Grecisms, all of which *also* occur in Pliny, *Ep.* V.6, and it seems that the reference to the hypodrome is simply there to be able to use the word, which shows how eagerly Sidonius aims to follow his literary example, which, if only on account of these Grecisms, must be Pliny V.6. From the lack of other Grecisms, moreover, we may also conclude that Sidonius' knowledge of Greek architectural phraseology was probably limited, while attributing architectural meaning to the phrases which he uses should be done with caution.²¹

If I understand the passage on the *cryptoporticus* correctly, Sidonius describes a room without inner partitions, extending from the *vestibulum* inward, the last part of which forms a dining-room for female dependants. Archaeological records would suggest that such a room was in fact a central reception-hall rather than a *cryptoporticus*, bisecting the *villa* into a northern and a southern wing.²² The baths being located south of the main building, the *triclinium matronalis* appears to have been located at the far end of the southern wing, which also contained the other rooms which would be associated with the women's quarters and, more generally, with domestic uses, while the rooms which the author is to describe from this point onwards are probably located in the northern wing, which would then consist of the male quarters, reserved for representational uses, and hence form the opposite of the southern wing in this respect.

Through the *cryptoporticus*, the reader is guided into the house again, and then into the northern wing. The first room to be discussed is the winter dining-room (*triclinium hiemale*, 11), which is of little consequence to the object of the text, as the invitation is for a summer holiday, but of great importance to scholars, as this

²⁰ Contrary to Dark's reconstruction (cf. Dark (2005), 334), which confuses the location of the baths in relation to the villa proper (south-west, rather than north-west), these rooms were part of the main building!

²¹ These Grecisms are: *hemicyclio* (4), *baptisterium* (8), *hypodromus* (10), *cryptoporticus* (10, 11), *diaeta* (11), and *sphaeristerio* (15). cf. Gualandrini (1979, p. 156, n. 44). On Sidonius' Greek, cf. Näf (1995), 137 n. 35. Only *baptisterium* and *cryptoporticus* are used in a second letter, *Ep.* 4.15.1 and *Ep.* 5.17.3 respectively; cf. Christiansen c.s. (1997).

²² Contra Dark (2005), 334.

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is the only evidence to show Sidonius could use this *villa* all year long, and not just in summer. From the winter dining-room the author continues to a summer dining-room (11), open to the lake. The similarity with dining-rooms with views in Pliny's *villae* is superficial, as any country house would secure a good view for its dining-rooms, which were meant to impress visitors.

5. *Summer splendour (sections 12-19)*

The next eight sections, in effect the second half of the *narratio*, are concerned with descriptions of the delights of a summer holiday in Avitacum, and the final stage of the walk through the *villa* itself, from the summer dining-room to the drawing-room at the north end of the *villa* (13).

12. If *decocta*²³ from this most celebrated of sources is brought to you, you will see snowflakes and scraps of mist in the cups, which are suddenly poured full, and that something has weakened the light in the cups as if through the abundance of sudden coldness. Then, the potions answering to the cups, their coldness is dreaded by any thirsty person, but not by someone so grandly sober as you. From this place you will see how the fisherman moves his boat toward the lake, how he sets out his standing nets with cork floats, or how hooked dragging lines, with markers attached at fixed intervals, are swung out, certainly in order that the most rapacious trout are driven towards bait of their own flesh during nightly excursions throughout the lake: what could I say on the subject that is more correct, when fish is caught by means of fish?

13. After the meal is over, the *deversorium* will receive you, because it is the least hot, and the most summer-like. For this room, which only looks out to the north, receives daylight, but no sunlight, because a very small sideroom is in the way, where there is room for sleepy servants, to drowse rather than to sleep.

14. Here we may pleasurably hear the chirping cicadas at midday, the babbling of frogs when twilight falls, swans and geese gagging in the early part of night, cocks crowing in the dead of night, ravens saluting the red torch of the rising Aurora with triplicate sound, at dawn the nightingale singing in the bushes, the swallow twittering from between the eaves! To this concert you may add the rustic muse of the seven-holed shepherd's flute, on which the sleepless Tityri²⁴ of our hills often practice in nightly song-battles, between belled herds resounding through grazed-off pastures. These varied melodies of voices and songs will seduce you to sink deeper into your sleep.

15. If you make for the harbour at the lakeside, having left the portico, you come into a green park, not far from an open forest. Two enormous lime-trees, with intertwined branches, but detached trunks shed one shade, but do not share one root system. In their shade we play ball, when my Ecdicius visits me, until the vibrating

²³ Boiled water cooled with snow.

²⁴ The shepherd from Vergil's *Eclogues*.

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shadow of the trees is restrained into the smaller area between the branches and makes an *aleatorium* there for those tired by the Sun-swallowed *sphaeristerium*.

16. But for you, learn what remains: just as I have given the house, thus I owe you the lake (*sicut aedificium solvi, sic lacum debeo*). The lake flows to the east, and when it is whipped up by the mountain winds, it moistens the foundations of the house, pressed into the sand, with its water. It is voraginous with only marshland around its beginning and inaccessible to the foot of the explorer: there a quicksand with weedy edges has formed, fed from the springs lying around it. The plain field of the lake's expanse is crossed far and wide by small boats, if the wind is calm, but if it is disturbed by a southerly gale, it vastly swells, so that the spray rains on the tops of the trees, which stand on the lake shore, spattering water on top of them.

17. The lake itself extends for seventeen of the measures called nautical measures, being entered by a stream, which, broken by one rough rock barrier after another, is covered with white foam from the impact, and plunges into the lake not long after, being freed from the steep rocks. Whether perhaps the river meets the lake or makes it, I do not know, but it certainly passes through it, forced to leave it through a subterranean tunnel, which does not deprive the river from its water, but from its fishes. Having been led to calmer waters, the fish grow, red flesh with white bellies; and because this does not allow to return or to escape, their corpulence turns into a live and portable prison.

18. The lake itself has on the right hand side a curved and wooded shore, and on the left an extending grassy plain. The lake seems green on its south west shore, because the colour from the foliage overhanging the water falls on the pebbles at the bottom: thus the shade colours the water. In the east a similar colour continues, equal to the tops of the forest. In the north the appearance of the side is like the nature of the water. In the west there are common and unplanned plants, often curved through the weight of boats sailing over them; all around this place tufts of deceitful reed bend to the wind, and likewise thick sheets of sedge float about, and the bitterness of the grey willow is always nourished by sweet water.

19. In the middle of the expanse is a small island, where a turn post stands out above the rocks that are assembled there by nature – a marker worn by naval races through the impact of the oars – near which the cheerful collisions of the racing teams occur, for in that place our ancestors had the habit of imitating the pagan Trojan games of Drepanum.

Though I owed you what I described above, I will tell you this about the estate: it is extensive with woodlands, coloured by meadows, rich in pastures, owned privately by the shepherds.

Whereas the section on the baths has been discussed most often, the present section has been the neglected part of the letter – even to the extent that the only Dutch translation of the letter breaks off at the beginning of section 15.²⁵ Still, these sections provide valuable information on the kind of aristocratic pastimes with which Sidonius associated Avitacum – dining and drinking (11-12), enjoying

²⁵ Ter Kuile (1976), 19.

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the sight of the lake (12) and the sounds of the birds (14), playing ball-games on the lawn or dice in the shade of the nearby trees (14-15), or boating on the lake itself (19), and it is this section which provides us with a full description of the lake, which was evidently the reason for the choice of this place as the location of the *villa*, and Sidonius' prime source of attraction to this place. Finally, there is a noticeable remark in it on the supposed relation between the Avernians and the Trojans (19), and the last of only three references on non-representational rooms in the *villa* – after the storeroom and weaving-room of the southern wing and the servants' dining-room in the middle of the *villa*, we now find an ante-chamber which is meant for sleepy *cubicularii* (14).²⁶

The list of aristocratic pastimes to which Sidonius refers in this letter, reappears in others, with a few additions. Hunting is not mentioned here, while it is elsewhere, as are playing ball and dice.²⁷ Reading is mentioned as part of aristocratic recreation in Sidonius, *Ep.* II.9.4-5, while the importance of reading and writing for the upkeep of the aristocratic circles in which Sidonius dwelled is evident from the existence of the *Epistulae* – which makes the absence of books in the description of both the *villa* and the pastimes in his letter all the more noticeable. Why does not Sidonius offer Domitius, a *grammaticus*, something to read? Perhaps Avitacum was only one of Sidonius' lesser houses, and his books were stored elsewhere, but could Sidonius really live without reading for the entirety of the holiday – or, for that matter, could he imagine the grammarian Domitius living without them?

The presence of books may have been so self-evident that Sidonius did not think much of explicitly mentioning them, but then again, so much detail is explicitly mentioned, where there is little reason for it, that even such an interpretation does not suffice. The only reasonably acceptable explanation would be that referring to books would be thought to refer to Domitius' town occupation and town lifestyle in general, and hence be unfit for inclusion in this bucolic eulogy of Avitacum, while we find books mentioned elsewhere in the *Epistulae*.²⁸

The lake, which is an important element of this letter, has been under-studied. Being the most prominent element of the natural surroundings of the *villa* in Avitacum, it appeared twice already, in the descriptions of the portico and of the summer dining-room, both of which are said to have a view of this lake. It should also be remembered that there is a superficial connection to Ameria, Domitius' fictional abode, which may not be wholly accidental, and a more obvious, and more obviously deliberate, connection to Pliny's Laurentine *villa* in *Ep.* II.17, which is oriented towards the seafront. It is here, moreover, that the pastoral theme which recurred at several places in previous sections comes into its own, in a section which is explicitly introduced as separate, hence serving a specific function,

²⁶ Cf. Näf (1995), 137-138.

²⁷ E.g. *Ep.* II.9.4, III.3.2, IV.4.1.

²⁸ E.g. *Ep.* II.9.1, V.17.6.

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probably to enhance the bucolic nature of the scene, and hence to increase the difference between Domitius' urban residence, and the place to which he is invited in the dog days of summer.

To enhance the bucolic scenery, Sidonius refers to the inaccessibility and roughness of the place where the river flows into the lake (16, 17), the natural wonder of the way in which the river leaves again (17), the different aspects of stretches of the lake's shore (18), and the humbleness of men in respect to the power of nature. To this end, also, literary references are made. The remark on the foundations of the house sunk into the lake's sandy shore (16) is an obvious reference to Matthew 7.26 – though there is no suggestion here that Sidonius' morality is questionable; human humility and natural might are all that matter here – while a few words further on the phrase *ventis motantibus aestuans* may be a reference to Servius' commentary on Vergil, *Bucolics* II.437 – exemplifying the bucolic nature of the place, which is also exemplified by a reference to Tyturus (14). This bucolic theme is perhaps the most important difference from Pliny's examples, which display estates which are fully shaped by man, with gardens, vineyards, and the like. 'Wild' nature, of the kind which Sidonius describes, has no place in Pliny's conception of his *villae*, of which the design and cultural, as opposed to natural, perfection were the author's pride and joy.

6. Conclusion

This paper attempted to explore the value of Sidonius' *Ep.* II.2 as a historical source. Previous interpretations had focussed mainly on the letter's descriptions of *villa* architecture. Any investigation, however, first has to address the problem of the letter's pragmatic purpose. While professing to be an invitation to Domitius for a summer holiday in Avitacum it is, in its present form, primarily an exercise in literary style, with all the games that go with that style, above all the showing off of literary accomplishment. This should make anyone beware of taking any expression used in the letter at face value. However, there are approaches which can do it justice, first of all a rhetorical and literary approach, which may indicate certain values with which the author explicitly wants to be associated, showing aspects of Sidonius' authorial self-perception. Recurring values include modesty, cultivation and *otium*, among other things expressed through the appreciation of the peace and quiet in the bucolic scenery of Avitacum. The letter, then, can at least be read as a mirror of Sidonius' values and the values of his ingroup, that is: of Late Antique Gallic aristocrats.

After comparing Pliny's originals to Sidonius' imitation we can also state that Sidonius paints a veracious picture of the *villa* at Avitacum itself, even though the picture is a partial one and coloured by the use of certain discursive screens. The Avitacum we get to see is a modest place, of a common *villa* design and without certain extravagances, though we are given to understand that the baths are adorned

with poetry, and marble, and the whole building, though modest, is still a building of considerable size and expense. Avitacum, on the whole, expresses its owner's professed modesty, his cultivation, and his appreciation of nature and peace and quiet. This image is, of course, only partial. The only things we get to see of the *villa* are those aspects which are in keeping with the express function of the *villa* as a place of *otium* – within the letter, but not necessarily exclusively so in real life. Several parts of the *villa* are not mentioned as a result, others, such as the estate, storerooms, the place where the women do their weaving, and even the winter dining-room, are only mentioned in passing, though this is enough to indicate that Avitacum could be inhabited all year long.

As a source informing about the appearance of *villae* in Late Antiquity the letter is of limited value. It reinforces our knowledge of a certain type of *villa*, which is well-established from archaeological finds, but as we know next to nothing of the building's 'hard data' – size, date of construction, location, or construction material – the image of Avitacum remains vague. Remarkably, it is this aspect of the letter, the exact aspect in which it is so non-informative as to say almost nothing, which has attracted most attention.

On the other hand, the letter is very informative about the use which Late Roman owners made of their *villae*. Avitacum is presented as an estate meant for pleasure and entertainment of guests, in a similar manner as the Late Republican *villae* of Baiae, though on a more modest scale; but even so there are hints to continuous use throughout the year and economic activity in the *villa*. The references to leisure are an example of the permanence of Roman aristocratic ways in Sidonius' circle. As a letter with a high degree of literary hinting and rhetorical display, it also shows the importance of literary sophistication in this elitist culture, an importance which is not represented explicitly in the letter's listing of the pleasures to be enjoyed in Avitacum.

Sidonius' *Ep.* II.2 is therefore a valuable and independent source on *villa* life in Late Antiquity, an aspect of this letter which has been under-studied and for which it is not dependent on Plinian phraseology. Though the pastimes described are little else than variations on aristocratic pastimes such as leisure, culture and sports – all of them forms of *otium*, their presence shows the continuation of Roman aristocratic life right up to the end (and over the edge) of Rome as a political entity in the West – though it should also be noted that the importance of baths as a marker of this culture has markedly increased since Pliny's days.

As noted above, Sidonius' discourse in this letter functions as a screen, which raises one of the central questions of historical source analysis, the question that also lies behind the question of the value of Sidonius' letters as a source for Late Antiquity with which this paper began: What amounts to reliability in a historical source? At the beginning of this paper we rephrased this question as follows: If Sidonius' *Epistulae* do indeed imitate Pliny, are they merely imitation or do they relate to Sidonius' own times, and if that is the case, what is the role of imitation and Plinian topology?

Pliny never seems to be far away in Sidonius' letter, but this is not to say that Sidonius merely copies Pliny, which at any rate would not have been in keeping with the ideals of imitation and emulation. Rather, Sidonius adorns his work with aspects of Plinian letters to enhance their literary sophistication. Similarities and borrowings go together with differences and new inventions, most prominently in the textual structure. The rhetorical structure (*iubes–iubeo*) of the letter's opening and the narrative structure of the *narratio* are not taken from Pliny's examples nor is, for that matter, the bucolic theme which is of such great importance, especially to the second part of the *narratio*.

Still, Sidonius' *Ep.* II.2 cannot be wholly understood without looking at Pliny, *Ep.* V.6, even if it is a literary piece in its own right. Sidonius, moreover, does not use Pliny exclusively. Other authors – Vergil, Vitruvius, Lucan, Martial, Ausonius, Terence, and perhaps also Cicero or Pliny the Elder – have been noted here or in other publications. Imitation in this letter is both a goal in itself, as with the Greek terms borrowed from Pliny, and a way of adding colour to the narrative. On the other hand, it would have been remarkable had Sidonius abstained from quotation: imitation and emulation were too ingrained in Late Antique literature for anyone to go without them.

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